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ABSTRACT

One of the basic problems men and women confront in any complex is the limitation imposed on their access to institutions of their society. How the problem of of institutional or structural access is related to ethnicity and ethnic studies is the focus of this essay. Concern for ethnicity and ethnic studies in education can be traced to the rejection of the assumption that equal participation in American society depends upon assimilation within the mainstream--resulting in neoethnicity, or the revitalization of ethnic cohesiveness with emphasis on the symbolic salience of each group. Ethnic studies are based on a cultural view of ethnicity. Cultural heritage studies stress the rediscovery of ethnic diversity so as to increase appreciation of each group. Their emphasis is on attitudinal and behavioral modification rather than on institutional reform. Cultural heritage studies based on a cultural view are misdirected since minorities demands for equal structural access lends support to a structural view. Cultural heritage studies need a bi-focal perspective of both cultural and structural views of ethnicity--a new vision focusing upon, on the one hand, the institutional conditions which determine the patterns of ethnic groups' adaptation to the larger society, and, on the other, the cultural characteristics of these groups. (Author/AM)

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Equal Social Participation: Neoethnicity and Culture Heritage Studies

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One of the basic problems men and women confront in any complex society is limitations imposed on their access to institutions of their society. It is a problem of participation in economic, political, educational, and other vital social institutions. Social justice can prevail if individuals have equal access to them, but, in most societies, they are arranged in such a way to impose on the individuals unequal access to them. The term central to the above problem is "structural" referring to the nature of institutional arrangement. This essay deals with how the problem of institutional/access is related to ethnicity (structural)
and ethnic studies.

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Neoethnicity and the Rise of Ethnic Studies

Since the mid-1960's, a salient change has taken place in the orientation of American ethnic groups toward participation in society.

They reject the time-honored assumption that equal participation in American society depends upon assimilation within the American cultural mainstream. Instead, they claim that equal participation is possible only when the ethnic groups achieve equal access to institutions of society while maintaining cultural differences. Their claim has meant demands for institutional change. What has resulted is "neoethnicity," the revitalization of ethnic cohesiveness with emphasis upon the symbolic salience of each group. Such transformation of the orientation of ethnic groups was pressed hard first by the blacks who have lost patience and endurance in their long search for cultural assimilation. In turn, other ethnic groups, such as the Puerto Rican, Mexican, Italian groups, started to capitalize upon the new social atmosphere late in the 1960's.

It is in this social background that concern for ethnicity and ethnic studies in education began to grow. Afro-American studies were introduced in colleges and public schools since the 1960's. Meanwhile, culture heritage studies and bilingual curricula also appeared in schools of the 1970's. In 1972, Congress enacted the American Ethnic Heritage Act, the first formal recognition of ethnic studies by the Federal government. Its stated purposes are to encourage each ethnic group to understand its own background, to foster comparative study of ethnic heritages, and to establish mutual cooperation. It authorizes the creation of a series of regional centers throughout the country to develop and disseminate materials concerning the history and culture of all ethnic groups, to schools, colleges, universities, and community centers.

Attention will be focused hereafter on culture heritage studies and particularly their background assumptions. Culture heritage studies stress generally the rediscovery of ethnic diversity in the hope that awareness of ethnic diversity will contribute eventually to the appreciation of each ethnic group with its own unique heritage. Thus, much attention has been given to searching for diversity among ethnic groups focusing upon ethnic histories and cultural characteristics. The mark of cultural pluralism is assumed to be tolerance and appreciation of diversity among peoples of different ethnic collectivities. The limited available literature makes it clear that the central thrust of culture heritage studies is to sensitize teacher trainees, teachers, and students toward cultural diversity. For, in the view of Richard Gambino, one of the spokesmen in the field, "ethnicity is commonly the source of events." "Ethnic studies programs," he argues, "should aim to build a cultural pluralism that is genuinely creative, rather than a pluralism of isolated groups, ignorant of and callous towards others."[1] In their critical examination of such programs, Dollar and Gittell identify their unexamined assumptions:

> intolerance of cultural differences is a product of people's ignorance, and can best be corrected by exposure to information and training; members of subculture groups do not participate fully in American society because they lack bicultural skills and self-image; or conversely, programs which enhance the bicultural skills and identity of subgroup members will enable them "to become participating citizens of a culturally pluralistic society"; cultural pluralism as a description of society at large may be achieved without major changes in institutions. 2

Despite the fact that neoethnicity aims at equal access to society by effecting change in institutional structures, culture heritage

studies which have been given rise by the development of neoethnicity appear to have little to do with such neoethnic commitment. Their overwhelming emphasis has been on attitudinal and behavioral modification rather than on institutional reform. To understand the orientation of culture heritage studies, it is necessary further to explore their background assumptions.

Cultural View vs. Structural View of Ethnicity

There are two approaches to ethnicity, cultural and structural. According to the structural view, an ethnic group exists in large measure due to the external conditions and is a particular form of adaptation to the larger society based on certain culturally common characteristics of individuals. The cultural view, on the other hand, suggests that ethnic group is dependent upon the existence of ethnic primordiality--certain cultural givens such as ethnic identity. Thus, ethnic group can persist regardless of the structural conditions of the social environment by virtue of its common sentiments, values, religious practices, languages, etc. Therefore, to understand ethnic group requires knowledge of these aspects of ethnic history. These two views represent two distinct ways of examining ethnicity, but are not entirely exclusive of each other. The background assumptions of ethnic studies referred to above are derived from the cultural approach.

Further attention will be paid to primordial dimensions in terms of which ethnic solidarity, inter-ethnic relations, and ethnic mobility in urban societies are examined. Basic group identity is regarded as essential to human existence. Issacs, for example, views it as a

centripetal force of the members of the same collectivity in most societies including new nations with political independence achieved in the past decade or so as well as highly industrial nations. "Tribalism" is thought to be a fundamental and universal mode of human identity constituting an invariable condition of social life regardless of societal complexity. He sees more fragmentation and divisiveness occurring currently than unity and solidarity in these societies because, he contends, basic group identity is threatened. In order to give his account of such imperative nature of man's group identity, he draws upon the psychoanalytic literature of Erikson and Fromm.[3]

Another dimension is an emphasis on ethnicity orientation. Differential patterns of social behavior are often attributed to ethnicity and explained in terms of ethnic history. The assumption of the cultural approach is that ethnicity is so pervasive and central to each person's life that it governs his behavior. Greeley, for example, is an articulate proponent of this approach. He is not concerned with the powerful structural forces of national society such as the effects of economic institutions upon groups, which penetrate into the ethnic communities, but largely with the continuity of ethnicity and its influence upon individuals and their groups. Hence, he refuses to view social mobility and inter-ethnic relations in terms of the economic and political structure of society which exerts differential effect upon the positions of ethnic groups; instead, he looks at such problems from a point of view of ethnicity orientation.[4]

Glazer and Moynihan argue also for the cultural approach. They

see differential degrees of social mobility and political participation among ethnic groups in New York City as a function of their ethnic orientations. Structural isolation of particular ethnic groups is attributed to group will and choice in distinctive ethnic traditions and rituals. They claim, for example:

> The two keys to understanding the role of Italians in America are the Italian neighborhood and the Italian family. Italians adapted to American society, took on new occupations, became politically significant, but still today, three generations after the founding of the first big Italian settlements in New York, the traditional bounds of neighborhood and family determine in large measure the accomplishments of American Italians. 5

Notice that Italo-Americans' relatively small degree of success and mobility is said to be due to their traditional pattern of life despite the fact that the history of urban ethnic groups in America shows an isolation caused by economic rejection.

Turning briefly to the structural view, ethnic solidarity in complex societies is seen as an adaptive response to structural conditions. The intensification of ethnicity may be best viewed as a function of response to structural exclusion confronted by ethnic groups in American society. Thus, to conceive the rise of ethnic solidarity as the revival or rediscovery of ethnic primordiality tends to be misleading. Hechter's study of the relationship between political and ethnic patterns in England and the Celtic fringe suggests this point clearly.[6]

According to the structural view complex societies of advanced industrialism have achieved a high degree of institutional differentiation as well as of political and economic integration. Such societies

tend to be structurally homogeneous for the roles in the political, economic, legal, and educational orders of society are clearly defined and largely generalized. They are extensively urbanized; individuals are expected to be mobile socially and physically. In such societies competition for gaining access to institutions and other social resources is intensified. Groups and individuals at the lower- and working-class level, however, suffer from the lack of participation in institutions vital to advancing their positions. This is where they appeal to group solidarity based on ethnicity to gain a greater degree of participation.

Thus, structural access becomes a key concept in understanding the rise of ethnicity in America. As Fried comments, "Issues of ethnic involvement and solidarity, on the one hand, and of prejudice and discrimination, on the other, have generally been closely linked in both evident and covert ways to social class discrimination."[7] Gans also offers a social-class interpretation of an Italian ethnic group in Boston though he does not belittle the significance of Italian ethnicity.[8] Likewise Sennett and Cobb see ethnicity as closely related to structural exclusion rather than as purely a way of preserving some special identity in the midst of an American mass.[9]

Bifocal Perspective of Culture Heritage Studies

Viable cultural pluralism in American society will be possible when the ethnic groups achieve equal participation in the institutional

system. The rise of ethnicity since the 1960's in America has directly been associated with their demand for equal structural access. This lends support to the structural view. The cultural view, however, does not sufficiently reflect the causative social forces of neoethnicity. This is where culture heritage studies based on the latter view tends to be misdirected.

What is needed is a bifocal perspective of both of these /views--a new vision focusing upon, on the one hand, the institutional conditions which determine the patterns of ethnic groups' adaptation to the larger society, and,on the other, the cultural characteristics of these groups. For human life is guided and influenced by both the conditions of social structure and cultural practices and orientations. If culture heritage studies are to address themselves to the urgent issues of the ethnic groups their orientation needs to be altered to reflect their commitment to the problems of participation while giving attention to cultural heritages. Thus, while drawing upon past experiences in ethnic studies, particuarly Afro-American studies, the bifocal perspective should be considered as a guiding principle for making culture heritage studies meaningful and provocative learning committed to social justice.

Footnotes

1. Richard Gambino, Working Papers--Ethnic Studies (New York: The Rockefeller Foundation, 1975), p.14.

2. Bruce Dollar and Marilyn Gittell, "Cultural Pluralism in Higher Education," Social Policy, 5: 38, November & December, 1974.

3. Harold Issacs, Idoles of the Tribe (New York: Harper, 1975), pp.1-25, p.26.

4. Andrew Greeley, Ethnicity in the United States (New York: Wiley, 1974), especially chapters 1 and 4.

5. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), p.186. For a different orientation see Ethnicity: Theory and Experience (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975) edited by Glazer and Moynihan.

6. Michael Hechter, "Political Economy of Ethnic Change," American Journal of Sociology, 79:1151-1178, March, 1974.

7. Marc Fried, The World of the Urban Working Class (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), p.178.

8. Herbert Gans, The Urban Villagers (New York: Free Press, 1962).

9. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class (New York: Knopf, 1972).